

# Kap Kap Ornaments from New Ireland

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To decorate oneself seems to be inherent in the human family. The most primitive races in the world delight in some form of personal ornamentation. The Australian native, under the mistaken notion of beauty, thrusts a large bone through the nose, supposing thereby that his appearance is enhanced, a supposition with which every European will disagree.

For the same reason the modern maid bedecks herself with gaily-colored ear-rings and other attractive jewellery, but no logically-minded person will agree that the addition of these trinkets adds to the beauty of the wearer. True, the ornaments themselves may be exquisite pieces of workmanship, and the stones spots of scintillating colors, but even that does not make a beautiful face more attractive or enhance the appearance of some less fortunate sister.

Another kind of ornament, however, fulfils two uses; it still serves the purpose of decoration, and, in addition, acts as a charm that brings good luck to the wearers or protects them from harm or injury.

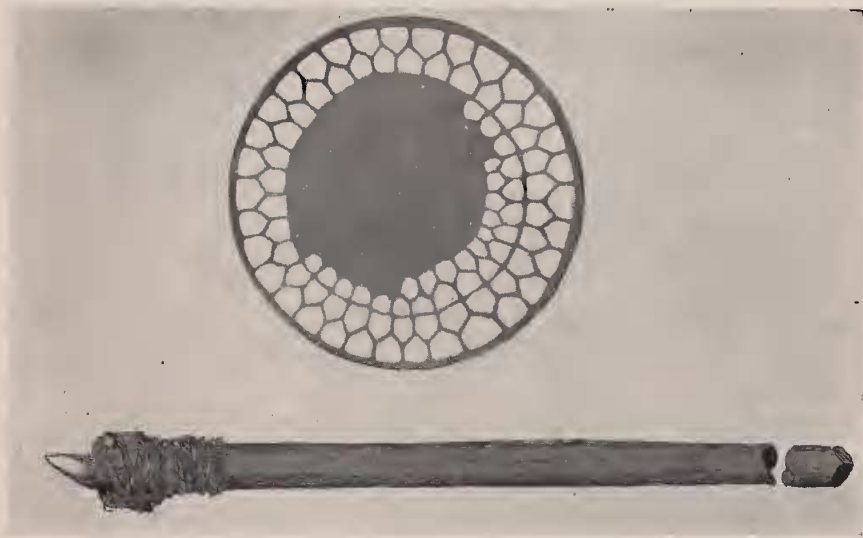
Many such are known to us; the swastika, a Babylonian symbol, which was considered, before Hitler decided that it should be the national insignia of his country, an omen of

good fortune; jade, supposed Chinese and Europeans alike to be both a harbinger of good luck and a particularly efficacious protection against misfortune; and amber necklaces, which are still believed, even by some normally well-educated and intelligent people, to be a preventive against chest troubles. Many other charms, such as horse-shoes, black cats, and nesting swallows are well known to us.

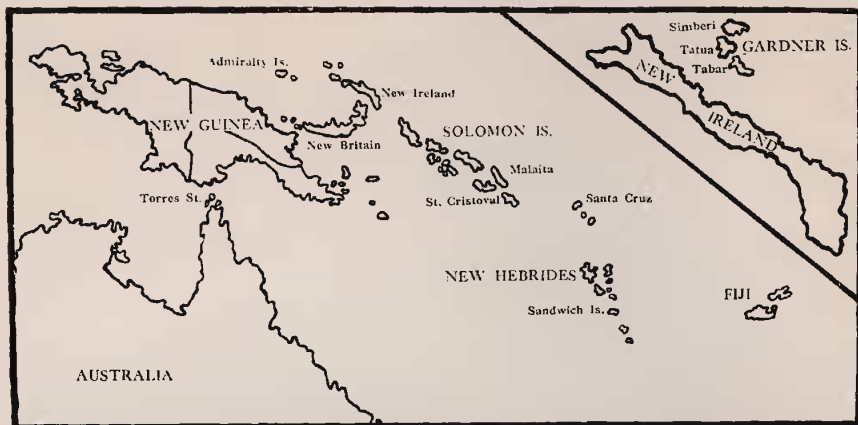
For centuries the artistic efforts of the finest craftsmen in the world have been expended in making of pieces of carved jade, amber, and gold. These were used by the people of long ago as amulets or lucky charms, amulets that served to please the eye because of their beauty, as well as to protect and bless the wearer by their virtue.

The amount of highly-skilled labor involved, as well as, in many cases, the rarity of the material employed, made many such articles unobtainable except by the wealthier members of the community.

When the late Mr. E. R. Waite, the Director of the South Australian Museum, visited New Ireland in 1919, he brought back a considerable number of exquisitely fretted pieces of tortoiseshell. These, to the natives of



Tool for cutting tortoiseshell ornaments, and an unfinished example.



Area in which pierced tortoiseshell ornaments are made.

those islands, combined the three virtues already mentioned, that is, personal adornment, good luck charms, and symbols of wealth.

The smallest examples, two of which can be seen opposite are worn by the women as a tight necklet. Others, larger and more ornate, such as shown on the top and bottom of the same illustration, decorate the men when they set out on war or raiding parties, for the New Irelander believes that the wearing of such an object is sufficient to prevent him being wounded in battle. Such ornaments are, indeed, so highly prized that they are used in the purchase of pigs and wives.

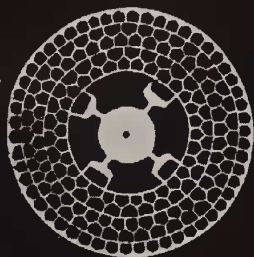
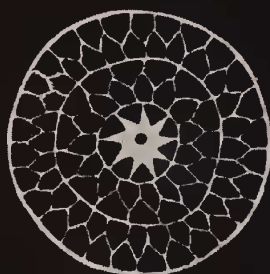
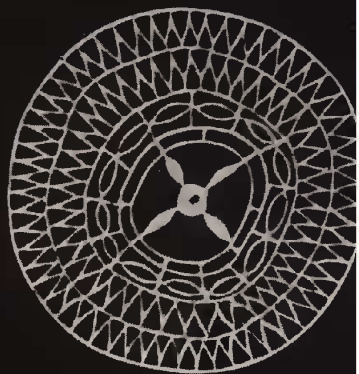
These ornaments, known to the New Irelanders as *Kap Kap*, are discs of tortoiseshell which have been ground down until they are no more than half a millimeter in thickness (that is, about one-fifteenth of an inch). With infinite patience the natives, with particularly simple tools, have fretted these thin discs into delicate filigree-like signs, several of which are shown on opposite page. In order to protect these fragile ornaments from injury, they are worn on a shell plaque ground from the shell of a giant clam (*Tridacna* sp.), as shown on page 5.

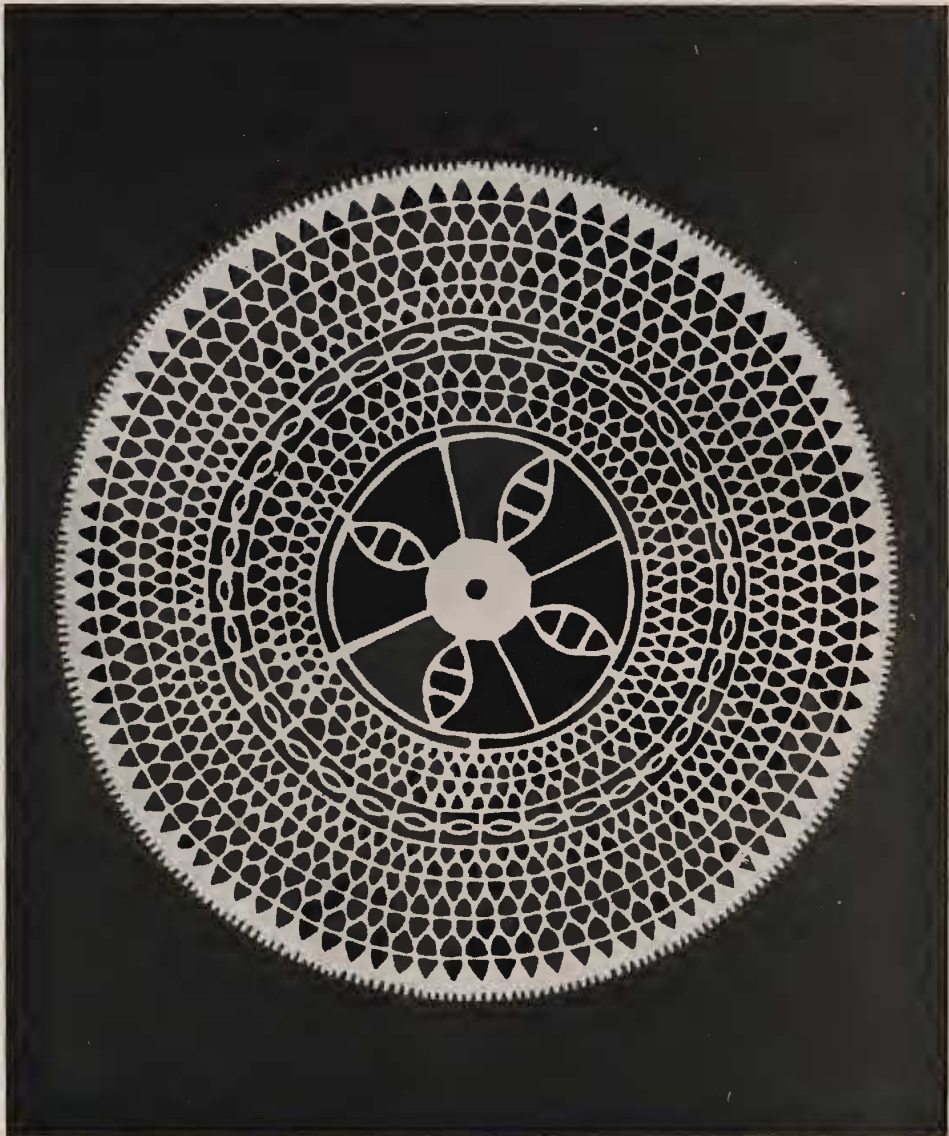
Some of these ornaments, of which the illustrations opposite are about four-fifths full size, are finely fretted that it is astonishing how the native, with a crude tool composed of no more than a shark's tooth,

mounted on a short stick about four inches in length, could have produced an object in material as brittle as tortoiseshell.

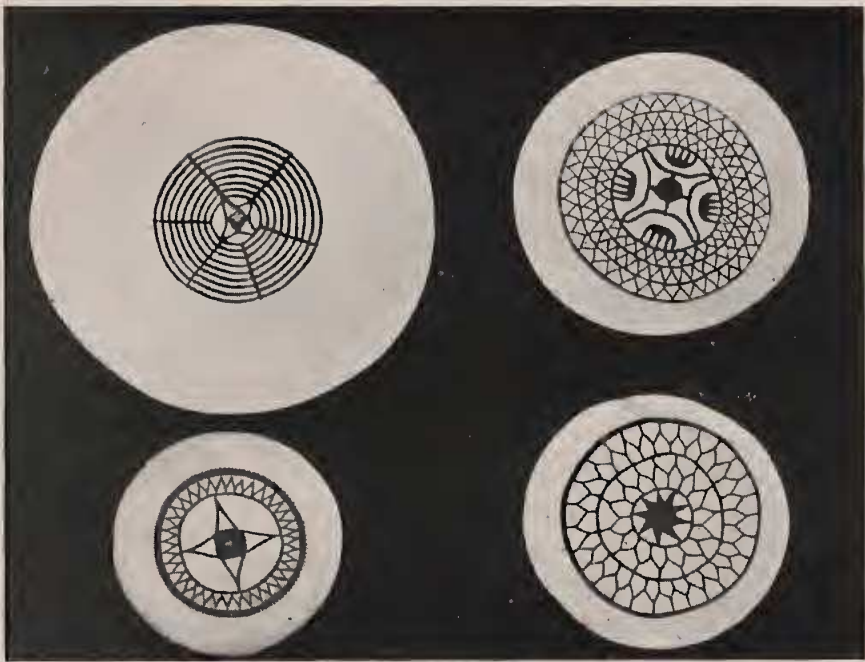
It was fortunate, also, that Mr. Waite was able to obtain a partly-finished *Kap Kap* ornament, and the tool that produced it. These are illustrated overleaf. As is to be expected, these *Kap Kap* ornaments are only owned by the wealthy, and small wonder it is, when one considers how many hours of painstaking work must have gone into the making of one such as the upper centre example shown on this plate, not to mention the most beautiful of all known to the writers, that shown in full size on the frontispiece. This example was collected from the mainland of New Guinea by Captain W. E. Sansom, and it is through the courtesy of his brother, H. G. Sansom, that this specimen is available for study.

Designs of pierced tortoiseshell (*Kap Kap*) ornaments from New Ireland.





Pierced tortoiseshell ornament from New Guinea.



Pierced tortoiseshell ornaments from New Ireland, fitted on shell plaques.

These ornaments are known in many islands of Oceania. Examples have been found in Admiralty Is., New Ireland, New Britain, and the Gardner group in the New Britain archipelago, westward in New Guinea and the Torres Strait Islands, and in the Solomon Is. and Fiji to the south. The inset map shows the position of the tiny Gardner group in the New Britain archipelago.

The plotting of these and other positions on the accompanying map shows that they are found only in Melanesia, although the Ethnographical album of the Pacific by Edge-Partington and Heape (p. 27, vol. III) illustrates a head dress with similar ornamentations from the Marquesas group. Except for the one example mentioned, they are not used, so far as the writers could ascertain, by either the people of Polynesia or Micronesia.